

Stone emulated in glass: an *alabastrum* and a glass *similis*, both from Hispania

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This paper considers the relationship between glass and the manufacture of stone items as part of the broader phenomenon of the imitation of products in highly valued and expensive raw materials (e.g., gold, silver, ornamental or semiprecious stone) by using more economical materials (glass, ceramic).

Some instances of stone imitating glass are known from panels of *opus sectile* and wall-revetments; there are also some instances of pottery imitation of stone in the Early Empire, but the stone vessels are rare.¹ This could be due to the fact that they are little known because many stone vessels entered collections in the 17th-18th c. while others ended up in cathedrals, thanks to the Crusaders or imperial munificence. An undetermined number may have been traded on the antiquities' markets or amongst private collectors. A good instance is the treasure of Lorenzo the Magnificent, whose vessels underwent numerous vicissitudes, passing from one treasury to another and from one collection to another, as a result of which they were hard to trace;² this only added to the complexity of dating vessels that lack a context and after they had been re-used. Under Rome, a large part of their production must have been absorbed by the imperial family and those close to them. Considered royal or imperial gifts, they belong to an exclusive sphere. Only a few pieces can have circulated amongst private owners (cf. the ones at Pompeii and Herculaneum³ or at Begram in Afghanistan⁴). Still, we must also take into consideration the existence of unclassified or misclassified fragments deriving mainly from old excavations. A similar pattern holds, for example, with *labra*,⁵ references to which were very scarce until A. Ambrogi's publication of 2005.⁶ Small stone containers may also have fragmented, which may contribute to them not being recognised as manufactured pieces.

The stone and glass vessels discussed here belong to the category of *unguentaria* to hold *medicamenta*, a term which mainly denotes cosmetics, body-conditioning substances either for external use (grooming, perfumes, makeup) or for internal use as pseudo-medicines, or they may hold pigments for use in different crafts. The vessels are thus likely

1 Some such vessels, principally those made of semiprecious stones such as chalcedony, agate and rock crystal, as well as murrhine vases, are included in P. H. Bühler's work, *Antike Gefässe aus Edelsteinen* (Mainz 1973). His work shows the difficulty of establishing a clear chronology, other than on comparative criteria.

2 N. Dacos et al., *Il tesoro di Lorenzo il Magnifico. Repertorio delle gemme e dei vasi* (Florence 1980).

3 C. Gasparri, "A proposito di un recente studio sui vasi antichi in pietra dura," *ArchClass* 27 (1975) 350-77.

4 S. Mehendale, "Begram catalog," in F. Hiebert and P. Cambon (edd.), *Afghanistan: hidden treasures from the National Museum, Kabul* (Washington, D.C. 2008) especially 201, nos. 214-16.

5 *Labrum* is a contraction of *lavabrum*, a container for water. In the ancient sources it has various meanings: a vessel or container with drinking water, a fountain bowl set in gardens and peristyles for decorative purposes, a basin in baths for reasons of hygiene or washing (see *TLL s.v. labrum*). Also A. Morillo and J. Salido, "Labra de época romana en Hispania," *ArchEspArq* 84 (2011) especially 153-57.

6 A. Ambrogi, *Labra di età romana in marmi bianchi e colorati* (Rome 2005).